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ABSTRACT

Theory and research on the development and maintenance of depression have emphasized both cognitive and interpersonal processes. One potential integration of interpersonal and cognitive models of depression is offered by symbolic interactionism, which argues that the self-concept is derived from our perception of how significant others view us. Applied to depression this perspective suggests that the depressed person's negative self-concept may be partly a reflection of significant others' negative interpersonal reactions to them. This study examined this integration by assessing how parents of children differing on level of depression and self-esteem view their children, and how they react emotionally to their children's failures and successes. Parents of fourth through seventh grade children (N=113) differing on depression level and self-esteem, rated their child's traits and reported how they would react emotionally to their child's failures and successes. Depression and lower self-esteem were associated with more negative trait ratings. More negative trait ratings were associated with more negative affective reactions to the child's (hypothetical) successes and failures, which reflected differential attributions about the child's successes and failures. Contains 10 references. (BF)

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Parent Perceptions, Affective Reactions, and Depression in Children

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ABSTRACT

Examined a potential integration of interpersonal and cognitive models of depression offered by symbolic interactionism, which argues that the self-concept is derived from our perception of how significant other's view us. Parents of fourth through seventh grade children (N = 113) differing on depression level and self-esteem rated their child's traits and reported how they would react emotionally to their child's failures and successes. Depression and lower self-esteem were associated with more negative trait ratings. More negative trait ratings were associated with more negative affective reactions to the child's (hypothetical) successes and failures, which reflected differential attributions about the child's successes and failures.

Parent Perceptions, Affective Reactions,
and Depression in Children

Statement of the Problem: Theory and research on the development and maintenance of depression have emphasized both cognitive and interpersonal processes. Cognitive theories focus on the role of negative self-schema, manifested in a negative view of one's self, one's future, and one's experiences in the world (e.g., Sacco & Beck, 1985). Interpersonal perspectives focus on disturbances in interpersonal relationships that often result in negative affective and behavioral reactions to the depressed (e.g., Sacco, Milana & Dunn, 1985). Data also supports the relevance of these theoretical models to depression in children (e.g., Sacco & Graves, 1984; Sacco & Macleod, 1990).

One potential integration of interpersonal and cognitive models of depression is offered by symbolic interactionism (e.g., Mead, 1934), which argues that the self-concept is derived from our perception of how significant other's view us. Applied to depression, this perspective suggests that the depressed person's negative self-concept may be partly a reflection of significant other's negative interpersonal reactions to them.

The present study examined this integration by assessing how parents of children differing on level of depression and self-esteem view their children, and how they react emotionally to their children's failures and successes.

Subjects: Children (N =113; 78 girls, 35 boys) and their parents (mothers = 109; fathers = 4) were recruited from grades 4-7 in three elementary schools.

Procedure: Children completed the Children's Depression Inventory (CDI; Kovacs, 1980) and the Coopersmith School Short Form (CS; Coopersmith, 1967), a self-report questionnaire consisting of 25 true/false items designed to assess general self-esteem.

Parents were administered the Child Trait Rating Scale (CTRS), developed for this study to assess the parent's generalized view of the child. The CTRS consisted of 16 bi-polar trait adjectives (e.g, critical-tolerant, likeable-unlikeable, leader-follower), taken from various self-concept inventories (e.g., Sherwood, 1965), but excluded characteristics that would directly reflect depressive symptoms (e.g., tired, sad). Data from this study indicated that the CTRS had high internal consistency (alpha = .86).

Parents were also asked to indicate their probable affective reactions to written descriptions of two hypothetical successes (your child received an "A" on a test; your child makes new friend) and two hypothetical failures (your child's teacher gives a lesson and your child does not understand it; some children tell your child that they do not like him/her). After each description they indicated, on a 7-point Likert scale, the extent to which they would feel: pleased, proud, confident, grateful, and surprized in response to the successes; and upset, anger, shame, sympathy, and pity in response to the failures. These affective responses were chosen to reflect differential causal attributions, as posited by attribution-emotion theories (e.g., Weiner, 1986). According to these theories, attributing negative outcomes to dispositional factors elicits emotions such as anger and shame; whereas attributing negative outcomes to situational factors elicits emotions such as pity and

sympathy. Conversely, attributing positive events to dispositional factors should elicit emotions such as pride and confidence; but when attributed to situational factors, positive events should elicit emotions such as gratitude and surprise. Weiner also suggests that general positive (e.g., pleased) and negative (e.g., upset) emotional reactions can occur despite causal attributions; i.e., these emotions are said to be outcome dependent.

It was hypothesized that parents of relatively depressed and low self-esteem children would evaluate their children more negatively on the CTRS and report more negative affective reactions to failures (i.e., affect reflecting more dispositional attributions for failures) and less positive affective reactions to their child's successes (i.e., affect reflecting more situational attributions for successes). CTRS ratings were also expected to correlate with affective reactions.

Results: As predicted, parents rated relatively depressed children (r=.26, p<.01) and children with lower self-esteem (r=.30, p<.01) more negatively on the CTRS (See Table 1). Contrary to prediction, child depression and self-esteem level were, in general, not significantly related to parents' affective reactions. CDI scores were significantly related only to greater surprise (r=.17, p< .05) and greater pride (r =.18, p< .05) after successes.

Parent trait ratings of their child (i.e., CTRS scores) were significantly related to greater levels of upset (r=.22, p<.05), anger (r=.27, p<.01), and shame (r=.36, p<.001) after failures and less confidence (r=-.25, p<.01) and greater surprize (r=.48, p<.001) after successes (See Table 2).

Conclusions:

1. Relatively depressed children (and those with lower self-esteem) are viewed more negatively by their parents. This finding is consistent with a symbolic interactionist theory of the development of the self-concept. However, further research is needed to establish the causal sequence leading to this relationship, and, hence the validity of the symbolic interactionist model.

2. Future research should examine the extent to which parents' negative perceptions of depressed (and low self-esteem) children reflect an accurate appraisal of the child's traits or a generalized and negatively biased perception of the child.

3. The negativity of the parent's view of the child is consistently related to more negative affective reactions to the child's failures (i.e., more upset, anger, shame) and less positive affective reactions to their successes (i.e., greater surprize, less confidence). Therefore, trait evaluations are associated with affective reactions that, according to attribution-emotion theory, reflect differential (dispositional versus situational) attributions for the child's success and failures.

4. Future research should explore how the valence of parent's generalized cognitive representation of their child (e.g., positive or negative schema) influences information processing about the child's behaviors as well as affective and behavioral reactions to the children.

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TABLE 1
CORRELATIONS AMONG CHILD DEPRESSION (CDI), CHILD SELF-ESTEEM (CS), AND PARENT'S TRAIT RATINGS OF THE CHILD (CTRS)

VARIABLE:	CDI	CS	CTRS
1. CDI	---		
2. CS	.74***	---	
3. CTRS	.26**	.30**	---

Note: CDI = Childhood Depression Inventory; CS = Coopersmith School Short Form; CTRS = Child Trait Rating Scale.

** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

TABLE 2
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN PARENT'S TRAIT RATINGS OF THE CHILD (CTRS) AND AFFECTIVE REACTIONS TO CHILD'S SUCCESS AND FAILURE

AFFECTIVE REACTION:	
(FAILURE)	
ANGRY	.27**
ASHAMED	.36***
UPSET	.22*
PITY	.05
SYMPATHY	.08
(SUCCESS)	
PROUD	.12
CONFIDENT	-.25**
PLEASED	-.02
SURPRISED	-.48***
GRATEFUL	.01

Note: CTRS = Child Trait Rating Scale.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$